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ABSTRACT

This paper examines what researchers have learned from teachers about high quality instruction for poor second language learners. It begins by describing the Vygotskian notion of responsivity. Next, it describes specific practices and guidelines, focusing on: differentiating instruction; understanding teachers' responsibility for knowing about students' lives; expecting the most and avoiding the deficit model; implementing curriculum that is meaningful to all students; recognizing knowledge of two languages and cultures; and being aware of default curriculum. The third section explains how to look beyond reading instruction, explaining that while differentiating instruction can improve the chances for all children to succeed, there are some larger societal issues that need to be part of the conversation (poverty, anti-immigrant and anti-bilingualism sentiments, lack of resources, and environmental hazards). The paper asserts that support networks of teachers and administrators are critical for rethinking curriculum and the role of teachers and administrators in larger community issues to best serve the needs of poor, inner city, second language learners. (SM)

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LISTENING TO INNER CITY TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS: DIFFERENTIATING LITERACY INSTRUCTION[1]

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THE PROBLEM

Too many students are not learning to be successful readers and writers. They are moving into the upper elementary grades as struggling readers. This inability becomes a burden that affects all of their academic learning. Children of color living in poverty and/or learning English are grossly over-represented in the group of unsuccessful literacy students. There has been important research in the last fifteen years that can help teachers and principals better meet the needs of children often unintentionally neglected by traditional instruction. Differentiated instruction improves children's chances for becoming competent readers and writers.

We have examined literacy learning in the inner city of Los Angeles for several years. Our research has been one of many studies conducted under the auspices of the nationally-funded Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement. Recently we analyzed what we have learned from teachers about high quality instruction for poor second language learners. We preface the discussion with a short description of the notion of responsivity, which subsumes the specific practices and guidelines presented later in the paper.

Vygotskian Notion of Responsivity

Sociocultural theory, with roots in Vytogsky's sociocultural theory of mind, emphasizes the social and cultural basis of teaching, learning, and development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In this view, teaching is seen as providing assistance (social mediation) to a learner at a level just above what might the learner might accomplish independently. Good instruction, which is responsive, then, falls in that space between what the learner can already do alone and what can be done with assistance. Instruction that ignores what students already know or can do, or that is too difficult, does not represent effective pedagogy. It is therefore important to understand and respond to what children know and to recognize what knowledge they come into the classroom with. It is also important to

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assure that simple factors such as language differences do not make instruction inappropriately difficult.

Differentiating Instruction

There are many ways to consider differentiating instruction for emergent readers and writers. We strongly believe that problems are situated within specific contexts much more than within specific individuals. Therefore, a single approach to varying instruction will not be appropriate for all schools, all teachers, or all children. Educators must have a repertoire of strategies so that they can vary their interactions and curriculum as needed. Below, we describe seven broad guidelines we have drawn from our research with teachers.

Be Responsible For Knowing About Your Students' Lives

Teachers must learn about their children's lives beyond the school walls. This inquiry can be formal or informal. Teachers can systematically investigate families' worlds. In his work with Latino immigrant families, Moll & Whitmore (1993) used the term "funds of knowledge" to refer to the incredible wealth of typically untapped community wisdom. He involved classroom teachers in examining the highly-developed information networks that enabled families to be successful in a variety of areas.

But there are some less time-consuming steps toward increasing their knowledge of specific communities. They can go for a print walk around the neighborhood, noting the types of public messages (business signs to graffiti), the languages utilized, and the purposes of text. Walking students home or other impromptu acts offer insights into children's lives beyond the schoolyard.

Expect The Most; Avoid The Deficit Model

It is important that we don't confuse differentiating instruction with lowering expectations. All too often this is the case, even with well-intentioned teachers. Allington (1983) captured this in a study on the way teachers' lead leveled reading groups. He found that students in the lower groups focused less on meaning than the "high group" and spent more time focused on phonemes. Frequently with second language learners, English oral proficiency is confounded with cognitive competence. Similarly, children with differing ways of experiencing narrative (such as story telling) are regularly assumed to be lacking intelligence. Children need high expectations and challenges in order to thrive. Educators need to figure out what children do know and use those strengths to move them forward.

Implement Curriculum That Is Meaningful To The Children

Most prepackaged curricula were created with middle-class, native English speakers in mind. Many of the children that fall outside of this group feel alienated when they cannot find images of their own lives in the curriculum. We must find ways to involve them and their worlds in the day-to-day life of the classroom.

One teacher that we recently worked with in a study on reading engagement used issues in the children's lives as the foundation for literacy instruction. For example, during the controversy over bilingual education (instigated by Proposition 227) one of her first graders asked why anyone would want people to know just one language. She set aside her plans and took the time to explore the issue more fully. The little boy came to the front of the class and explained what he had seen and how he felt. The class discussed the advantages of knowing two languages and the disadvantage of knowing just English or Spanish.

In another instance during Social Studies, she asked the children to create 3-D habitats. Many of the children talked about their overcrowded apartments and homes they wished to have in the future. These kinds of activities legitimize the children's lives and concerns that are rarely represented in curriculum materials.

Recognize Knowledge Of Two Languages And Cultures

Often students labeled "low" or "struggling" in reading are using language in rich and complex ways outside of school. Specifically, many of these children act as "language brokers," a term coined by McQuillan & Tse (1995). They help monolingual family members interact with the English-dominant environment. This can mean explaining to salespeople what a parent wants, paying bills, and/or translating for doctors and teachers. Literacy brokers learn to be sensitive to cultural and contextual norms when moving between two languages.

Besides carrying the burden of critical interactions, these young English-language learners are figuring out the difficult process of translation, as well as frequently working with a wide variety of genres including bills, receipts, coupons and legal documents. Teachers can tap into this typically ignored resource of knowledge. This knowledge can inform teachers' whole group instruction as well as individualized interventions.

Another benefit to recognizing children's linguistic backgrounds is a better understanding of students' writing and inventive spelling. Although teachers can not be fluent in every language spoken in their classroom, general knowledge about other languages can lead to informative analysis. For example, a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish enables specific knowledge of why some students may be using some spelling patterns, such as "ll" for a "y" sound. Remembering to reflect on the deeper reasons students may be writing or spelling in a certain way can inform differentiated instruction.

Be Aware Of Default Curriculum: Content And Structure

There are routines and topics that are viewed by many as "givens." One very common structural pattern of classroom interactions is teacher-lecture, teacher-question, followed by teacher-conclusion. The teacher decides what will be covered, how it will be covered, and students respond within a narrow band of behaviors with a small ratio of talk compared to that of the teachers. Teachers we worked with remember hating this structure, but many are reproducing it in their own classrooms. This default curriculum is what new teachers see practiced in their classrooms, represented in most curriculum

guides, expected by teachers and, for most, was their dominant in their schooling experience.

Similarly, there is default content. For example, in Los Angeles, many elementary classrooms spend some time focusing on the four seasons. But it is rare to find a tree with orange and yellow trees in the fall, we only see snow on the peaks of mountains; and rainy season does not fit neatly into winter, fall, spring, or summer. As teachers and principals, we must interrogate our curriculum. We need the structure and content to work for our students. Also, we need to remember to communicate the reasons for our practices to both our students and their parents.

Looking beyond Reading Instruction

Differentiating instruction can improve the chances for all children to be successful. But there are some larger societal issues that need to be a part of the conversation. Teachers and principals need society's support.

Poverty

Edmund W. Gordon, the first director of Head Start, stated, "I think schools can be much more powerful, but I don't think they can reverse all the ill effects of a starkly disadvantaged status in society" (as quoted in Traub, 2000). The inequities of our society and the pervasiveness of poverty is recognized in many ways in the mass media. Yet schools are often expected to balance out all inequities. As Traub (2000) wrote in a New York Times article, "The idea that school, by itself, cannot cure poverty is hardly astonishing, but it is amazing how much of our political discourse is implicitly predicated on the notion that it can".

As educators, we need to fight outside the school walls as well as inside to increase the chance for success for poor children. Learning about the economic realities of our children's parents and community issues can enable us to see the complexity between economic opportunities and poverty.

Anti-immigrant Sentiment and Anti-bilingualism

Recently there has been an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment as well as a move to discourage bilingualism. One way to examine this issue is to consider the recent initiatives that have been put before the California voters. This state seems to be leading a trend that is moving across the country.

Proposition 187, which focused on illegal immigrants in 1994, was the first major initiative that caught voters' attention. It made illegal aliens ineligible for public social services, public health care services (unless in cases of emergency under federal law), and public school education at elementary, secondary, and post-secondary levels. Various state and local agencies, including schools and specifically teachers, were required to report those who were suspected of being in the country illegally. The measure was described in the official ballot argument as "the first giant stride in ultimately ending the ILLEGAL ALIEN invasion."

Although this proposition was found unconstitutional in the courts, two years later Proposition 209 was passed in California. Commonly known as the "Anti-Affirmative Action Proposition," among other things, it prohibited "...the state, local governments, districts, public universities, colleges, and schools, and other government instrumentalities from discriminating against or giving preferential treatment to any individual or group in public employment, public education, or public contracting on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin."

Perhaps the most controversial initiative of all was Proposition 227, commonly known as the "Anti-bilingual Initiative." On June 2, 1998, California voters overwhelmingly approved Proposition 227, an initiative that largely eliminates bilingual education from the state's public schools. Under the California initiative, most limited-English-proficient students in that state are now placed in English-immersion programs and then shifted as quickly as possible into regular classrooms.

Parents, students, and bilingual teachers talk about their feelings of shame even though they knew these propositions were wrong. These larger societal and institutional issues impede children's learning. When students do not feel valued and when they are encouraged to disown parts of themselves, they are less likely to engage in school tasks.

Lack of Resources

Most of the schools serving poor children have fewer resources than those in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. For example, the most recent elementary school where we conducted research on reading engagement did not have a library until last year. When they did get one, it was solely because the principal obtained a grant. The scarcity of written materials is a common problem even though literacy researchers have documented how access to books increases the time children spend reading, and thus improves their literacy competencies.

Even though many children have strong family and community networks and there are advantages to living downtown, the difficulties are numerous. Money for community and police-sponsored programs that once flourished in large cities has shrunk. Drug deals are common in the streets and crime is high. Safe areas to play outside are almost non-existent when living in a downtown apartment, hotel, or shelter. Most importantly, many of the educational opportunities are expensive. We found that many families had not visited the nearby Children's Museum due to high admission fees. The library also was often not used because the parents were afraid of the fines attached to late, damaged, and lost books. Transportation to other areas of town is typically time-consuming and/or cost-prohibitive.

There are solutions to these problems, but they need to be long-term and multifaceted. Many corporations are beginning to make positive differences in downtown living conditions. Creation and support of after-school and weekend programs provides safe places for children. Another way to intervene is to become politically active. Pushing for extra funding for fieldtrips is yet another area in which efforts could fight the disadvantages of living in urban poverty.

Environmental Hazards

Safety and health issues are rarely discussed problems that decrease children's chances for being successful literacy learners. In our conversations with teachers and their principals, we found they spent a great deal of time and energy fighting for the conditions that are a given in suburban schools. For over a year, one teacher requested to have the vents cleaned in her bungalow because of health reports connecting the presence of microorganisms to cancer. Bungalows were also found to lack good circulation, since the only door in the room is closed and many do not have windows that open. Neither of these issues was addressed in the media until they were an issue in the suburban schools.

These classrooms are also supposed to be vacuumed once a month. In many classrooms in other schools it is done once a week. One teacher had to write several letters to the plant manager informing him that she was not being included, and then waited months for action. The plant manager does not report to the principal, so there is not an immediate supervisor on campus.

These problems may arise in all school districts, but they are more numerous and the resolutions seem to take longer in crowded urban schools. Even when parents are involved in academic activities, such as literacy nights, there are deterrents to participation, including long schedules and language issues, that make further involvement difficult. In suburban schools, at least a few vocal parents are more likely to intervene in these kinds of problems. Also, middle- and upper-class parents tend to know more about how to influence the system. For example, they know at what level to complain, whom to write letters to, and the best tone and content for interactions with the schools.

Conclusion

Improving the numbers of successful literacy learners requires action on multiple levels: teachers and administrators, academics, community leaders, parents, and politicians. As educators we need to simultaneously look inward at classroom curriculum, and outward at societal issues that impede our students' progress. Practicing the guidelines we have learned from teachers is difficult. Support networks of teachers and administrators are critical for rethinking our curriculum and our role in larger community issues, to best serve the needs of poor, inner-city second language learners.

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